

Harris County morgue is solving property crimes

County DNA testing requests doubled in a year

By PEGGY O'HARE Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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A morgue may not be a likely place to solve burglaries and thefts, but that's just what the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office is doing within the walls of its forensic biology laboratory.

While the lab is best known for testing evidence related to homicides and sexual assaults, it also solves property crimes by retrieving and testing blood or invisible DNA evidence left at a burglary or theft scene — maybe some skin cells left on a surface touched by an intruder, or perhaps cells found on a cigarette butt, partially eaten food, a beer bottle or soda can.

In fact, the amount of property crime evidence submitted to the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office for testing skyrocketed in 2008, with the lab receiving twice as many cases as it did in 2007.

DNA labs across the country typically don't have the resources to test evidence related to burglaries and thefts, said Dr. Roger Kahn, director of the county's forensic biology lab. But Harris County has one of the few medical examiner's labs in the nation that is trained in

five disciplines — forensic biology, trace evidence, fire debris analysis, drug analysis and toxicology.

The lab operates independently of law enforcement agencies and is not affiliated with the Houston Police Department lab, which has been dogged by scandal in recent years.

The county's lab receives more evidence connected to attacks on people — and gives those cases priority — but its DNA analysts actually have better odds of solving property crimes, Kahn said.

"These are crimes that don't often get solved" without such testing, Khan said. "There's a national study out that says DNA will find more burglary suspects and lead to more arrests than fingerprints do."

Nearly two-thirds of the property crime cases referred to the medical examiner's lab are matched to other crimes or a suspect through the Combined DNA Index System database known as CODIS, which allows agencies across the country to compare DNA evidence.

Trace evidence works

Even if no fingerprints are recovered by investigators, the medical examiner's lab can sometimes solve crimes using "touch DNA," or invisible DNA traces left at a crime scene, such as skin cells.

"With a reasonable level of success, you can get

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DNA off things that are just touched," Kahn said. "It's important for (police agencies) to know that — that we will accept those samples (for testing), and that we will often be successful."

The Harris County lab has successfully matched DNA evidence collected from some very unlikely objects, including a champagne flute.

It also has tested evidence such as sweat left on a window, vomit found at a crime scene and DNA recovered from a water bottle.

The Harris County Medical Examiner's lab began testing evidence from property crimes on a limited basis when it joined the CODIS database in 2001.

Over the years, demand for such tests steadily increased. Since 2003, the county's DNA lab has expanded from seven employees to 37. The lab presently works with more than 65 law enforcement agencies within Harris County's boundaries, said Mary Daniels, the medical examiner's director of operations.

Reaching out to police

Last year, the medical examiner's office began reaching out to educate and train local police agencies to submit property crime evidence for such tests.

Since September 2007, its lab has linked evidence from 392 cases to other crimes or suspects in the CODIS database — including 240 property crimes and 152 attacks on people.

When a DNA profile is run through CODIS, Kahn said, "it's three times more likely to match if it's a property crime. Almost two-thirds of the time, when you put in a property crime sample into CODIS, something comes back — it either matches to another case or to an offender. That's the most eye popping."

Such breakthroughs are important because they can help prevent future burglaries, thefts and even violent crimes against people, said Beverly Begay, chief investigator at the medical examiner's office.

The county's lab is accredited by five institutions, including the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors, the American Board of Forensic Toxicology and the National Association of Medical Examiners.

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Resources

JUST CRIMES LIKE THEFTS, BURGLARIES

Property crimes referred to the Harris County Medical Examiner's Lab for DNA testing:

- **2008:** 856
- **2007 :** 397
- **2006:** 175
- **2005:** 136
- **2004:** 155

ALL TYPES OF CRIME

Total cases submitted to the Harris County Medical Examiner's Laboratory for DNA testing

- **2008:** 1,979
- **2007:** 1,442
- **2006:** 1,076
- **2005:** 1,061
- **2004:** 892